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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses factors contributing to differing translations of the same source text, arguing that translation occurs on a continuum rather than having absolute criteria and procedures. Issues examined include the formal properties of the text, the text's "invariant core of meaning," stability in the semantic elements of the text, the text as both product and process, sources of differing interpretations, socialization of the translator, and the varying translations' degrees of dependence on the source text. Contains 19 references. (MSE)

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Plurality in Translation

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Any given source text induces numerous translations in any given target language. The cause for the plurality and diversity of these translations, no matter whether they are recognized as inadequate, mediocre, optimal,...etc., is still an unresolved issue in translation studies. However, the existence, or the possibility of coming into existence, of several translations of a source text in a target language is an evidence of the fact that translation, by nature, possesses, among other things, the quality of being indeterministic, at least in certain respects. The issue of indeterminacy is best identifiable in the various dichotomies suggested by translation scholars within the past few decades, for example Savory's (1957) literal versus free translation, Nida and Taber's (1969) formal versus dynamic translation , Newmark's (1989) communicative versus semantic translation , Venuti's (1992) domesticated versus foreignized translation,...etc. The core of all these dichotomies is that translation moves on a continuum rather than being absolute.

The fact that translation moves on a continuum and therefore hardly yields itself to rigorous judgements adopted in empirical sciences, contradicts many

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of the attempts made so far to come up with concrete and fixed criteria for judging the adequate translation from the inadequate. However, the adequate and the inadequate versions are all translations of a single source text. What makes them pass as translations, and what makes them distinct as different translations ?

Although not thoroughly explored in translation studies, the above questions have been tackled by very few translation scholars, among whom Popovic provides the most elaborate, yet disputable account. Under the influence of structuralism, and transformational grammar in particular, Popovic (1976:6-11) assigns the diversity of target language versions to formal properties of the text and justifies the possibility of several target language versions of a source text in terms of what he calls "the invariant core of meaning" in the following way :

> In every translation there is an 'invariant core' which is represented by stable, basic and constant semantic elements in the text.Their existence can be proved by an experimental semantic condensation.This core of standardized meanings makes a reader's or translator's (or another) concretization , i.e. transformations and variants, possible. These imply changes that do not modify the core of meaning but influence only the expressive form.

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Popovic further claims that the invariant element of a translation is the relation between all the existing translations of the same original, in other words, what they have in common. Variants, as he defines it, is that part of a translation which is subject to substitution. This , he asserts, is the domain of transformations or "shifts of expression", the domain of translation metacreation (see Van den Broeck 1978).

Further, in discussing his four types of translation equivalence, Popovic describes 'stylistic equivalence' as an instance where " functional equivalence of elements in both original and translation aim at an identity with an invariant of identical meaning".

Popovic's assumption is disputable in the following respects:

a) Any change in what Popovic calls 'variants' or shifts of expression, affects coherence, which as a reader-motivated standard of texuality relates the elements of a text to each other , and thus affects and modifies the so-called 'invariant core of meaning'. Moreover, the so-called 'invariant' finds expression in the form of variants; therefore as the form of expression changes, the meaning changes as well. Such changes, no matter how minor or slight , question the possibility of assigning the quality of 'invariance' to any textual elements.

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b) The assumption that the semantic elements in a text are stable and constant , has lead Popovic to seek 'an invariant of identical meaning' across languages . But identical meaning cannot be achieved and established across languages, unless a relation of symmetry holds between them, which is far from reality (see Snell- Hornby (1988:16).

Popovic's assumption that the semantic elements in a text are stable and constant is a major tenet of the structuralist approaches to translation, including Nida's (1964, 1969), Catford's (1965), Larson's (1983) and many others'. The assumption bears three major implications:

- that text is a finite product ,
- that meaning is stable and constant, and
- that the semantic elements remain constant under translation.

All the implications are disputable and are denied in practice. Language in its essence is an interpretation of the phenomenal world. Thus any text reveals its writer's interpretation of the world or of some other verbal interpretation (see Fairclough 1989:80).

A text is both a product and a process at the same time. As a product, it

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constitutes a point within the process of communication, where a given interpretation of either the phenomenal world of some other verbal interpretation (a prior text) is materialized in language and physically recorded. As a process, it is a communication between a writer and a reader, an ongoing interaction in the form of what Bex (1996:53) calls a dialogue. As such, a text is both dynamic and static at the same time. Texts are dynamic in that they initiate communication and extend to the reader, and at the same time create the conditions for their interpretation through their linguistic properties. They are static in that their interpretation is controlled both by their linguistic properties and the situational and intertextual conditions under which they are to be interpreted. In Thaibault's (1991:13) words:

> Realization embodies the formal copatterned lexico-grammatical selections in textual production in the sense that these textual productions are both the realization of something as the finished product and the process that enacts or realizes this product.
>
> (cited from Bex 1996:55)

If a text is both a product and a process at the same time, then meaning becomes dynamic, starting with this product and extending beyond it . In other words, meaning is not stable, nor constant. It starts with the text, but does not end there. Rather it extends to the reader and is partly assigned by

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the reader, in the course of reading , and as communication proceeds. Thus meaning varies from one reader to another. In fact, each time a text is read, a novel reading of it is achieved and a new text thus emerges.

If there exist different readings of a text, it is because there exist different interpretations of it, which give rise to different target language versions. The plurality of the interpretations of a text, and the plurality of the target versions thereof, results from the following:

a) what each reader/translator brings with her to the text, or reads into the text ;

b) a basic quality inherent in any text, including the source text .The source text is not a self-contained, closed and solidified product with a single meaning established or hidden in it. In the course of reading the source text, the reader/translator interprets the source text which is a writer's interpretation of the world, using the textual cues not only to make sense of it, but at the same time to assign sense to it, and constructs the target text upon her personal interpretation of it. In this sense, translation is not a rewriting of the source text, but as Derrida (1979:145) defines it, a writing in its own right:

> Translation is writing ; that is, it is not translation only in the sense of transcription. It is a productive writing called forth by the original text.
>
> (cited from: Chamberlain1992:70)

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Every translation is therefore a unique creation, inspired by a unique interpretation , called forth by and derived from the source text. However, and paradoxically enough, each shares something with other target language versions of the same source text. There are two reasons for this. The first is that each unique interpretation is determined and controlled by the same social environment. In other words, translators as readers are not free to choose how to read and interpret the source text. As Fish (1980) argues:

> Since the thoughts an individual can think and the mental operations he can perform have their source in some or other interpretive community, he is much a product of that community (acting as an extension of it) as the meanings it enables him to produce... Members of the same community will necessarily agree because they will see (and by seeing , make) everything in relation to that community's assumed purposes and goals...
>
> (cited from: Taylor 1992:163)

The second reason is that linguistic signs are not totally indeterminate. As Bex (1996:54) puts it:

> Although they [linguistic signs] may convey different messages to different people in different circumstances , the possible range of these messages is constrained by a number of factors...

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As Bex (ibid:55) further suggests, these factors include "choosing one interpretation over another" and "reader's awareness of how other similar texts operate".

So all readers/translators socializing within the same interpretive community interpret texts by the method which they acquire through the process of socializing (see Taylor 1992:163). And this is how each translation shares certain aspects with others, while at the same time contributing to the plurality of target language versions through its uniqueness.

The plurality of target language versions contradicts the concept of 'the single correct translation', since following on from Birch (1989:25):

> ...there is nothing inherently correct or right about anything; there are levels of appropriateness relative to particular ideas, theories and systems of classifying.

The different target language versions derived from a source text can be judged not in terms of equivalence, but in terms of degrees of dependence on the source text, as determined and controlled by particular norms and approaches to translation. Thus the target texts which show greater dependence on the source text and at the same time meet the requirements of acceptability as determined by the norms of the target language community qualify as good/adequate translations.

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